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# CANAWLERS



HAROLD W. THOMPSON





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Reprinted from  
BODY, BOOTS & BRITCHES  
by Harold W. Thompson. Published by  
The J. B. Lippincott Company  
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Prepared by the Staff of the  
Public Library of Fort Wayne and Allen County  
1956



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One of a historical series, this pamphlet is published under the direction of the governing Boards of the Public Library of Fort Wayne and Allen County.

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## FOREWORD

In the nineteenth century the Erie Canal, joining Lake Erie with the Atlantic, carried a tide of commerce, travelers, and immigrants to the Midwest. The canallers were a lusty lot -- hard working, hard fighting, and hard drinking.

The following publication, narrating the songs and ballads, the fighting and brawling, the tales and anecdotes of the canallers, originally appeared as chapter X of *BODY, BOOTS & BRITCHES* by Harold W. Thompson. The volume was published by the J. B. Lippincott Company in 1940.

The Boards and the Staff of the Public Library of Fort Wayne and Allen County present this reprint in the hope that it will prove interesting and informative to Library patrons.



IN THE year which gave us the Federal Constitution, an American poet named Joel Barlow produced his *Vision of Columbus*. A graduate of Yale College, a citizen of Connecticut, and (strangely enough) a radical in politics, the poet made a true prophecy for the Empire State:

He saw, as widely spreads the unchannell'd plain  
Where inland realms for ages bloom'd in vain,  
Canals, long winding, ope a watery flight,  
And distant streams, and seas and lakes unite.  
From fair Albania, tow'rd the falling sun,  
Back through the midland lengthening channels run;  
Meet the far lake, the beauteous towns that lave,  
And Hudson joined to broad Ohio's wave.

Jefferson was less sanguine; he thought that to "talk of making a canal three hundred and fifty miles through a wilderness is little short of madness at this day". Madison vetoed a bill that would have assisted the State to construct it. The Holland Land Company, which had for sale a considerable portion of Western New York, hesitantly granted a hundred thousand acres upon condition that by 1842 the Canal should be completed. So the Yorkers built the Ditch themselves—extemporizing engineers, inventing tools, importing bog-men

from Ireland to cut through the swamps. On Independence Day of 1817 the first spadeful of earth was turned at Rome, New York. On October 26, 1825, cannon boomed across the State, from the port of Buffalo to the port of New York, the news that Governor Clinton's Ditch was built, that New York had become the Empire State, that America was ready to march west to continental glory.

Buffalo should never forget that October day. After the singing of an ode composed by a journeyman mechanic, the little frontier settlement heard its cannon roar while DeWitt Clinton boarded the *Seneca Chief* for the first trip through the entire length of the Grand Canal. The name *Seneca* was symbolic of the Indian Keepers of the Western Gate. The cannon were symbolic: many of them had been brought from Presque Isle's Navy Yard—from the ships of Commodore Perry and his defeated foes, in memory of another autumn day, thirteen years before, when the United States had won the mastery of the Great Lakes. Following the Governor's boat came several others with symbolic names: *Superior*, *Commodore Perry*, *Buffalo*, *Lion of the West*. On the last named of these boats were more symbols, of a day that was passing: two Indian boys, a bear, two eagles, two fawns, and many birds and fish. In the cabin of the *Seneca Chief* lay "two elegant kegs", painted with patriotic designs and filled with water from Lake Erie. Within about eighty minutes the cannon, placed eight to twelve miles apart, brought to New York, nearly five hundred miles away, the news that the Governor's four gray horses had begun a journey that was to continue through villages soon to be great cities—a journey that was to end at the metropolis which DeWitt Clinton had assured the commercial supremacy of the Western Hemisphere.

The final ceremonies took place at Sandy Hook in New York harbor. The waters of Lake Erie were mingled with the Atlantic; vials were emptied containing a few drops from the Mississippi, the Columbia, the Thames, the Seine, the Rhine, the Danube, the Amazon, the La Plata, the Orinoco, the Ganges, the Indus, the Gambia, and the Nile. Said the Governor:

This solemnity, at this place, . . . is intended to indicate and commemorate the navigable communication which has been accomplished

between our Mediterranean Seas and the Atlantic Ocean, in about eight years, to the extent of more than four hundred and twenty-five miles, by the wisdom, public spirit, and energy of the people of New York; and may the God of heavens and the earth smile most propitiously on this work, and render it subservient to the best interests of the human race.

So far as America was concerned, and the incredible hordes of her immigrants, the prayer was answered. I have been told that when the nation saw *The Farmer Takes a Wife*, Mr. Edmonds' moving-picture portraying life on the old canal, the peak of interest was reached not in New York State and in the East, but in those western states where the people remembered that it was the canal which set their destiny. In 1810 the State of Ohio ranked thirteenth in population; in 1840 it was third. In 1810 there were four settlements in Michigan, with less than five thousand people; in 1840 the population was 212,000—largely of immigrants from New York and New England. It is no wonder that the state song of the Wolverines said:

Then there's the state of New York, where some are very rich,  
Themselves and a few others have dug a mighty ditch,  
To render it more easy for us to find the way,  
And sail upon the waters to Michigania;  
Yea, yea, yea, to Michigania.

As for the Yorkers, all of them who saw the canal built realized the new importance of the Irish, sturdy folk who did most of the hard work in constructing the Ditch and the early railroads. Dr. O. P. Hubbard, who lived at Rome, New York, where the digging started, wrote to a friend years later:

Wild Irish bog trotters from West Ireland, cutting out the trees the width of the canal track, were set to work knee deep in the wet muck; they could wear no clothing but a flannel shirt and a slouch cap, and there were no tools that could be used. Shovels and spades were out of the question and a rectangular side-board wheelbarrow equally useless . . . It was a weird sight to see on a long line, both sides of the canal, hundreds of these wild Irish men at work. Saturday nights in their board shanties, "fighting drunk", and contractors had to go in and club them right and left to quiet them . . . I have seen teacher Mathews . . . without a hat, long hair flying, screaming "Murder!" and running up



in the dust like that." Bill said: "Well, Captain, you know, before breakfast I can't seem to fight right." So John took him over to a canal-store and bought him some beer and bread and cheese—all he wanted. When he'd finished eating, Bill called the other driver off his boat and licked him easy.

Jerry McCarthy was known as the Champion of the Chemung Canal, a branch going down from Seneca Lake to Elmira—it's closed now. I seen this Jerry fight a nigger at Geneva—a fellow named George Taylor. McCarthy's boat with a load of lumber on it was tied up at the dock. The colored fellow had his towline out and his team drawing; the towline caught in the lumber and threw some of it into the canal. McCarthy wanted the coon to get the boards out of the water; he wouldn't do it; McCarthy hit him, and they began punching around. First one would be on top and then the other; neither one could get the best of it. Finally some men standing around watching separated them—they generally did this after a fight had lasted some time. The coon said: "If I'd knowed you was a champion, I don't believe I'd have started; but as long as I did, I'd just as soon finish it."

The biggest fight I ever heard of was at Memphis, a little town about thirteen miles from Syracuse. I was two-three miles away, near Peru, when I heard there was a big fight going on. The way it started was, there was this bran-new boat, and this old boat came alongside and scratched the paint. This made the captain of the new boat pretty mad, and he said to the captain of the other boat: "Say, I'd like to punch your jaw for that!"

The other captain says: "Why, I got a driver that kin lick you!" This was an insult, because the drivers were generally young boys.

The first captain says: "Where is he? I'd like to see the driver that can lick me."

The driver spoke up from the towpath and says: "Here I am; come on out, and I'll show you."

The captain jumped off his boat, and they went to fighting on the grass. Then a man jumped off and joined them, then one off the other boat, until both crews were out there, mixing in. There's generally five men on a crew—the captain, two steersmen, and two drivers—so pretty soon here was the whole ten of them, fightin' to beat the deuce. After they fit for a long time, they was all knocked out except one man on one side and two on the other. The two of them couldn't knock this one man down; so after a while one of the two went over to the boat and asked the cook to give him a heavy stick or something. She handed him a heavy





prancin' around... tryin' to knock off the other fellow's hat

iron bar. He went back with it, watched his chance, and gave the fellow a crack on the head along by his jaw, and it killed him. There wasn't any jail at Memphis; so they locked the men up in a barn till they could take them to Syracuse to be tried. I never heard what happened to that fellow that killed the man.

They used to have races without fights, too. There was two towing lines on the canal: the Liverpool, and the Western Towing Company or W. T., originally called the Conbo. The W. T. had red hames for the harness, and the Liverpool had blue ones. I wish't I could remember that long piece that tells about a race:

Yonder goes the *Sea Gull*, five miles ahead:  
Up comes the Conbo, hames painted red.  
Then the Captain hollered, "I'll give you half a dollar  
If you can overhaul the boat up ahead."  
The driver says, "Captain, half a dollar's pretty small;  
You give me a dollar, and I'll let the team haul."

The plain fact is that the canallers enjoyed fighting from sheer high spirits. Mr. Tommy Collins of Waterford on the Champlain branch of the canal remembers the heyday of an innocent sport which he describes:

Just as much as boxing and wrestling nowadays, a great sport of the canallers was knocking off hats. They'd buy these wide-brimmed straw hats and wet the crown, then stick their fist up 'em, and stretch 'em 'way up till they'd be about a foot high.

I remember seeing these fellows, with these big, yellow straw hats and their pants rolled up above their knees and prancin' around in their bare feet, tryin' to knock off the other fellow's hat. It was great sport. The one who knocked off the other fellow's hat most times in a certain length of time won. Then the loser bought a drink. They were a happy lot. In them days instead of a-goin' to the Foreign Legion they'd get jobs as drivers on the canal.

If you wanted something lively, you should have seen Election Day. The State boats used to start comin' early in the mornin'. They'd be loaded with men bought by some party or other, and they'd start right in Albany to vote, then they'd go to Watervliet—then here—Mechanicville—then Stillwater and right up the line. They'd stop at every single place along the way, and every last one of 'em would vote. By the time they'd stopped in two or three places—well, they'd be noisy. All of us

kids used to ride on the boats too, and then parade in every town for whatever party wanted us to. And politicians runnin' around buyin' votes. There was one man in Stillwater that they said would sell his vote for a barrel of flour. Useful stuff, flour, but you know, nobody that *was* anybody would sell their vote. On Election Day you could tell those who were anybody and those who weren't. Sing? I can't remember what they sang, except one verse:

Never tickle a mule when he's reposing.  
If you disturb his slumbers, you're a fool.  
Take my advice—don't do it twice.  
Don't bother 'round the hind-end of a mule.

The reputation earned on the canal for fighting might be embarrassing. For instance, there was a certain driver who settled down in Mechanicville, only to be summoned to the door one night by a drunken railroader who wished to revive the ancient feud of railroad vs. canawl.

"You think you're the best damn fighter in Mechanicville, doncha?" says this guy to Bill.

"Well, now," says Bill peaceable, "I don't dispute another's right to the claim."

"You think you're the best damn fighter in Mechanicville, doncha?" says the feller, madder'n hell and squarin' off to paste one on Bill.

Bill's wife's been standin' there too, and she runs and gets the broom, and comes back wavin' it. But Bill grabs the broom and says to her, "Wait a minute, wait a minute!"

Then he says to the feller, "Now, if ye think ye're the best of them in Mechanicville, then so ye are."

"O no, you don't," says the railroader, "I gonna prove it."

"Well then, come on," says Bill, grabbin' his coat; and they go up 'side the High School and they goes to it.

Bill was a buckner. Have ye met any? He didn't hit with his fists; he banged with his head, very hard. He bucked the railroader all to hell. He knocks him out and stamps on him two or three times. Then he carries him about three blocks all the way up to the drugstore and gets him all fixed up before he goes back to his own peaceful home again. It's a terrible thing, a reputation.

Another driver who left the canal had a nice little "place" up at Schuylerville, where, just to keep himself in form, he "used to clean

up his bartenders just before he let them go and got a new one". The one exception was a lad with a good Irish name, a stutterer; either it was not in the master's code to strike one who stuttered, or no convenient excuse occurred for starting the shindig when the lad departed. Two years later he returned for a jolly visit with his former employer. As he was leaving, well fed and happy, he said:

"Do y-y-you know, I'm the only b-b-bartender you ever let g-g-go without a c-c-cleaning up?"

"Well," cried the master, dragging back his first, "thank God, it ain't too late now!"

Across the river from Waterford, at Cohoes, the easiest and politest way to start a fight among the canallers was to drop into any "power-house" or tavern on Saturday and mention with disrespect any of the counties of Ireland. This would insure a fine time for everyone, because so great was the local pride of the Irish canaller that a man from Limerick was only too happy at any time to accommodate a "Tip" with the back of his hand. I wish that I could have seen an evening at "Pole" Berry's place near the Falls at Cohoes, as it lives in the memory of a few old men. Having only one leg, Berry scorned a crutch; the pole which he used could be employed to string a whole row of empty steins or to disqualify anyone creating a nuisance. Perhaps he could have given me full versions of the many songs which I possess only in fragments. Here are two stanzas from a ditty about one of the cheap Cohoes hotels for canallers:

It's one cent for coffee,  
Two cents for bread,  
Three for mince pie,  
And five for a bed.

There's eighty-three boarders  
All packed at my door,  
And they paid their five cents  
For to sleep on the floor.

Another song says:

The breeze from the gutter  
Is the salt-water smell



On the European plan  
At the bummers' hotel.

If obstreperous enough, the canaller might find accommodation in the old Cohoes jail, which, for some obscure reason, is called in a ballad the *Albany Jail*:

Oh, one gets arrested,  
The other goes bail,  
That's what you get  
At the Albany jail.

The coffee's like tobacco-juice,  
The bread is hard and stale;  
That's what you get  
At the Albany jail.

"Yep," they would say, "when I die, I'm not going to stop at Heaven. I'm going fifteen miles beyond, to Fiddler's Green. We'll never be dry there, and there'll be fun on Saturday nights." Pending their approach to Fiddler's Green, most canawlers of convivial habit after the Civil War were content to spend their money along the old Sidecut at the east end of the Erie. The map of what is now the city of Watervliet has changed, but if you stroll down Second Avenue there, between 22nd and 24th Streets, you can imagine the Lower Sidecut, Erie Street, Whitehall Street, and what the newspaper boys call the "Barbary Coast of the East", a name which the lads of the *Buffalo News* and *Courier-Express* will steal for the Buffalo waterfront any time that you aren't looking. The Sidecut, in the memory of "Footy" Gilboy (once the best dancer on the canal and hero of a gallant rescue) lives on,\* though the Tub of Blood closed long ago, and you look in vain for the Black Rag, The Pig's Ear, Peg Leg House, The Right Bower of Oswego, Free and Easy, Limpy George's, The Gamecock House, The Newark Goose, and about fifty other places of liquid refreshment and sanguinary encounter. What could you expect? If you permitted locktenders—notoriously crazy—and canawlers to meet, fists must fly, though the general rule held that if two were fighting and a third intervened, the original combatants

\* As this book goes to press, word reaches me of "Footy's" demise.

both turned upon the interloper, whether he happened to be a locktender or a true son of the towpath.

To be sure, at Paddy Ryan's there was a sign reading, "All the fighting done here I do", but Paddy was not only a handsome, soft-spoken host, he was that truly heroic pugilist from whom in 1882 the great John L. Sullivan won the heavyweight boxing championship of the world. Next to Governor Clinton, who liked to call himself Hibernicus, Ryan seems to me the most memorable personality of our romantic Ditch. Let me give an unlaquered story of his career as told me by his only living child and her stalwart son.

Patrick Henry Ryan was born in 1853 on the March day sacred to his Saint. Like many another canawler he was a real "Tip" from Tipperary. In the years of his might he wore green stockings, black trunks ornamented with green shamrocks, and a red-white-and-blue belt. He arrived in America at the age of eight, just as the Civil War was beginning. Four years later, at old West Troy (Watervliet), he saved little Judy McGraw from drowning in the canal. His leap from the bank to a raft from which he dove resulted in a rupture which compelled him to wear a truss even in his formal fights; but he was so little handicapped by the injury that he could do a man's hard work in the shops of the D. and H. R. R., and a little later could win the combats required of a locktender on the Erie. About 1874 he opened his famous bar at the old Sidecut, where his ability to discipline unruly patrons impressed Jimmy Killoran, athletic director at the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. By 1877, Killoran's training had prepared his protégé for professional boxing.

Ryan's earliest fight remembered in legend was the one for a purse of twenty-five dollars at Green Island. His opponent, a certain "Blue-skin", came into the ring so heavily greased that Paddy's knuckles kept slipping off until Killoran had the happy idea of rubbing them in the dirt. In another early bout against a man named Myers in the Gaiety Theatre at Albany, the strenuous Killoran went at Ryan with a chair-leg between rounds for not exerting his full strength. "He says he's sick," was Paddy's respectful excuse. In the next round, Myers was knocked out.

Probably the fight with "Professor" Miller of Australia was one of these early encounters. The Professor was introducing at Boston





Paddy said: "I'm waitin' for them to come back."

his scientific method of scoring: The boxers smeared their knuckles with lamp-black; between rounds, the officials counted the marks made by the blows; then the smudges were washed off, and a new round began. When it was announced that Ryan had won by a score of 29-9, the Professor so far lost his temper and caution as to start wrestling, an art at which he claimed to be the Australian champion. But Paddy, trained in a hundred tussles on the canal, accomplished a cross-buttock throw. The next moment, the Professor went crashing over the footlights into the orchestra pit, doing such damage to the piano that he was compelled to pay for a new instrument.

It was the code of the Sidecut that anyone pretending to skill as a fighter should be compelled to demonstrate his talents to any number who cared to lock him into a bar-room. At the old Collins House, Troy, a dozen earnest experimenters secured the door and announced to Ryan that they intended to "kick him apart". At the end of the affair, those who unlocked the door (from the outside) found twelve recumbent forms, an incredible number of smashed bottles, and a bent stove-shaker. Though it involved only four opponents, I prefer the fracas described by Paddy's veracious trainer, Mr. Killoran:

I had been over to see Ryan that day, and he had not been in his place. So I kept along the street until I came to a saloon kept by a man named Sullivan. This was in what was then called Durhamville. I thought Paddy might have stopped in there. Sure enough, there was Ryan sitting on the little wooden stoop, his face in his hands. And he was a sight. He was cut all over the face and head and his clothes were hanging to him. Said I: "What's the matter, Paddy?" "Matter!" said he. "Look inside." I didn't have to go in the place to look. There wasn't a light of glass in the windows or the top of the door, and the floor was covered with broken bottles that used to be on the back bar. It looked as if there had been a riot there. I found out from Paddy that four had set on him and had locked the door while they went at him. And it wasn't him all that time that wanted that door open—it was the four of them. Ryan told me he had fired one fellow through the window. It looked it.

"Come on home," I says, starting away, but Ryan didn't get up to go. I said, "What are you waitin' for?"

And Paddy said, looking up the street: "I'm waitin' for them to come back."



the epic Ryan - Goss fight, on June 1, 1880



After some three years of desultory boxing, with Troy as headquarters, Ryan's great day arrived. A certain Johnny Dwyer, claiming to be the American heavyweight champion, fought an exhibition bout at Troy with the English and European champion, Joe Goss. That night, Paddy challenged Dwyer. The Englishman helped the young aspirant to train at Sand Lake. When Dwyer failed to keep his appointment, Goss challenged Ryan, who could now claim the American title by default.

The epic Ryan-Goss fight took place on June 1, 1880, at Colliers Station, West Virginia. It was a contest with bare knuckles by the old Marquis of Queensberry rules: A round ended when either man "fell", even if he only dropped to one knee, as was discreetly done when need was felt for an intermission. If you struck a kneeling opponent, you forfeited the bout. Long before those eighty-six rounds were finished, Goss was repeatedly trying the wily trick of snarling, "Paddy, you Irish son-of-a-bitch!"—just before falling to his knee. But Killoran's warnings were heeded; Ryan did not foul, and the fight went on until both faces were "beaten to a jelly". When the bell rang for the opening of the eighty-seventh round, Goss did not come out of his corner; Ryan had won in one hour and twenty-eight minutes. The King of the Erie Canal was the Champion of the World. His triumph was sung by the American folk in *Paddy Ryan's Victory*, a ballad of ten double stanzas containing these fervid lines:

From round seventy-eight to eighty-six,  
Left room for to believe  
No Englishman could ever stand  
The weight of Paddy's sleeve;  
For his well trained hundred pounder  
It lighted with free will  
In the very corner that Joe choose  
His flood did freely spill.

Round eighty-seven you would swear  
The heavens burst out in war,  
The word of victory freely went  
From every ancient craw;

The referee the time did call,  
But Joe could not reply,  
And the fight was freely given  
To our bold Tipperary boy.

Not all those who had bet their shirts could enjoy the ballad. Some disgruntled patrons explained that Goss had been handicapped from the moment when Paddy had knocked his front teeth down his throat. (As a matter of fact, Goss had prudently removed a set of false teeth.) Feeling ran so high on one train returning from West Virginia that the conductor locked the doors of a car in the hope of limiting a free-for-all massacre. Apparently Ryan left the train. Somewhere in Virginia a gang mobbed him and left him, feigning death, with a knife-wound in the abdomen. It will always be remembered that a little later, rather than disappoint a crowd of canallers and other neighbors, Ryan and his wife removed the stitches from his gash so that he might spar a few exhibition rounds at Rensselaer Park in Troy.

It is a pity that Ryan had to live in the same era with the Strong Boy of Boston; he should have worn his crown more than two years. On February 7, 1882, at Mississippi City he was knocked out in the ninth by the peerless John L. Sullivan—in the presence of another ballad-hero, Jesse James the bandit, who a few months later was shot by a "dirty little coward". Beside the championship of the world, the diamond belt (fresh from the jeweller), and the side-bet of \$1,000 posted by each contender, Ryan lost forever the affection of some men who would never admit that their neighbor could have been defeated unless he had "thrown" the fight, though, as the faithful Killoran truly said, "If the devil was to come out of the pit this moment, he couldn't lick Sullivan." There was a return bout at Madison Square Garden, but prize-fights were illegal, and the New York police stopped the contest in its third round.

The rest of Ryan's story is the familiar one of the defeated champion, except that Paddy never was dissipated—though he did add forty pounds to the two hundred and twenty of his best days. Everyone with whom I have talked says that he remained the quiet, generous gentleman. For a time he traveled with Sullivan the uproarious, acting and sparring and trying to keep his friend sober. When the

Strong Boy of Boston fell off a rear platform, it was Paddy who stopped the train and hastened back to find his pal, "orry-eyed" but uninjured. It was not Ryan's practice to go behind the bar in his "places" at Albany, New York, Chicago, and San Francisco, but indirectly he was responsible for a famous American drink. On the bar of his saloon in Chicago stood a steaming bowl of Tom and Jerry, served free, named for two brothers-in-law who assisted Ryan's hospitality, Tom and Jerry Gettings. Perhaps Paddy was too generous with his free drinks. When he died at Green Island, most of his money had gone with the old fighting days of the canawl, leaving faithful Killoran to tell over past glories and to help bear a coffin containing six-feet-two of courage fallen quiet, Patrick Henry Ryan.

To return to the Sidecut—there was plenty of entertainment in addition to boxing and brawling. It is said that a certain Davie would allow himself to be knocked downstairs five times in succession with a hammer-blow on the head. I have not learned the reason for his prejudice against a sixth blow. "Jumpy" Burke's favorite exhibition was to leap clear across a lock with a pair of heavy dumb-bells in his hands. Nelse Carter ambitiously introduced a variety show for his patrons; he is said to have been the first and only one of the old-time hosts to try dancing girls. His patrons preferred a tightrope artist who every night walked from Nelse's place, across the canal and to the top of a tree, pushing a wheelbarrow and at times (by some cantrip which I have not clearly in mind) frying an egg in transit. Jimmy Wood is said to have installed the first telephone in West Troy, as it was called, and insisted upon a large gong in place of the sissy bell usually provided. When someone called him up, the canallers for three blocks would rush up to hear the critter talk.

Toward the end of the century, a favorite song at the east end of the canal was *The Edison Machine*, a vigorous expression of Irish prejudice against England and the A. P. A. (American Protective Association, an anti-Catholic group):

Mike Murphy owned a fine saloon,  
He never knew grief nor care;  
It mattered not to Murphy  
Whether the day was dark or fair.



An Irish gang hung 'round his place  
That better days had seen,  
When Murphy caused his troubles  
With an Edison talking-machine.

The picture that was in the place,  
The anxious look on each man's face!  
Beside the great machine Murphy could be seen  
Explaining all the great things done by Edison.

A neighbor called Dan Brady called—  
Dan was an awful pest;  
He looked upon the new machine  
And was delighted like the rest.

Said Brady, "Can you make it play  
*The Wearing of the Green?*"  
But Murphy by mistake put on  
The song known as *God Save the Queen*.

Dan Brady he went out and soon came back;  
Poor Murphy still lay on the floor,  
And "Bull" McCarthy shouted out,  
"Let's try the thing once more!"

Poor Murphy from the floor got up  
And fainted dead away,  
For by mistake the thing got mixed  
With the speech of an A. P. A.

Dan Brady's mug was white  
When he threw some dynamite.  
Now Murphy's dead and buried—  
*All through Edison.*

Now and again a shindig would lead to an entertaining day in court, though justice was usually lenient. One unfortunate parrot lost his life by screeching too often a sentence learned from his mistress, the wife of a West Troy judge: "The Judge is drunk again." One beloved but formidable canal-captain always took to court, when

summoned, his wife and thirteen children, to create unfailing sympathy of one sort or another.

It is not to be supposed that fighting was confined to ancient times or to the east end of the canal. Mr. Oviatt McConnell of Buffalo likes to tell of the late Captain Ed Scouten, who died in 1922 at the ripe age of ninety-three. Cap'n Ed was a Civil War veteran who knew the canal intimately for half a century, and who lived to command one of the modern "hoodledashers", powered boats which surge along with a barge in front and a couple behind. The Cap'n used to *stop* fights by stepping in and thrashing the combatants one at a time or, if they preferred, together. When he was about seventy-five, he decided to follow a general custom by hiring a fighter. On the first voyage out, it occurred to him that he hadn't tried his slugger to see whether he was up to canal-standards; so he picked a fight and knocked out the professional. It is told of him that in the 'seventies he was walking through a canal town, his luxuriant whiskers waving. Approaching some loungers, he predicted, "One of these fellows is going to say *Baa* to me on account of my whiskers, and I am going to pop him". The prediction was immediately fulfilled.

The classic tale at Buffalo is of the big battle between Charley and Jack. Jack bit off a piece of Charley's ear and spat it on the deck; whereupon there followed the following curt dialogue:

"There's your ear, Charley."

"You bit it off, you cuss. Now eat it!"

Fighting and even the biting off of ears is a part of the frontier tradition and waterfront etiquette. Most of our canallers, of course, led quiet and, on the first Ditch, idyllic lives. Some of the old-timers tell you that fighting stopped after the Civil War; others say that it started then with the "hoggies", floating laborers. Mr. Allen Walsh, who has made a more careful study of canal-life than anyone else I know at Buffalo, told me that it is the floating laborer who still gives trouble: one large company has had to bail out of jail as many as fifty men in a week. Such stories have elements of pathos, but the most poignant ones concern the boy drivers on Clinton's Ditch.

There is a thin volume published in 1845 and entitled *Five Years on the Erie Canal*. It was written by a puritanical but compassionate and obviously sincere layman missionary sent out by the American

Bethel Society—a certain Deacon M. Eaton. Convicted of sin when an “old and very wicked man”, he says that he was the first missionary concerned with improving the morals of the canallers. He estimates that in 1845 there were some 4,000 boats employing 25,000 men, women, and boys. Of these, about 5,000 were boy drivers, often only thirteen or fourteen years of age, hired for ten dollars a month and board. Some unscrupulous captains employed tactics familiar to whaling masters: toward the end of the season they became so brutal that the boys left without collecting their pay. Some captains were brutal all the time.

One of the Deacon’s stories concerns a sick orphan—and half of the boys were orphans—who was so ill that he fell off his horse at a lock, cut his head severely, and lay senseless. Throwing him into a board shanty, the captain ordered his other boy to drive on. The lock-tender, when asked whether he didn’t intend to do something for the lad, replied: “No. I wish he *was* dead. He is the wickedest boy on the canal.” It was a hot day in July; the sun beat down on the unconscious driver—the boards were off one side of the shanty. Finally a good Samaritan passed, took him home, and called a doctor. Four days later, the boy returned to consciousness. Asked if he was really the worst boy on the canal, he replied that he supposed he was; for five years he had been treated like a slave; cheated out of his wages, he had taken to lying, stealing, and getting drunk. Restored to health, he got a job with a decent captain and within five years was a captain himself.

Another story is of a boy thrown off a boat in a big swamp between Rome and New London. The captain had two defenses: that the child had cholera, and that “he is no more sick than you are—he is a lazy villain”. Next day a dog found the lad lying upon logs in the swamp. He never spoke—died within an hour and a half. It is no wonder that the Chaplain at Auburn State’s Prison reported to Deacon Eaton that he found on the prison records four hundred and eighty names of those who had worked on the canals and the lakes.

The one song about these boy drivers which I have collected shows a merrier side of their life. Mrs. A. H. Shearer of Buffalo got it from Mrs. Broadbeck of Tonawanda, who used to live on canal-boats:

When I was young and about sixteen, none was more light and gay;  
I gamboled nimbly on the green or sported in the hay;  
The bloom of youth was on my cheeks, my heart was full of joy.  
How happy were those days to me, a merry boatman's boy!

For I was a boatman's boy, for I was a boatman's boy.  
Johnny, get your mules fed; Johnny, get your mules fed,  
For I was a boatman's boy.

I loved to use a pocket-knife before I went to school,  
And soon I learned the mysteries of that wasteful, magic tool.  
I hoarded cents I prized so high—I gladly gave to own—  
And soon I learned the magic art to whet it on a stone.

On the whole, the old Ditch bore a merry crew whose chief trials were of a burlesque variety. The one canal ballad which you are likely to find in any songster printed before the Civil War is *The Raging Canal*, the nub of whose long-winded humor is that boatmen were in peril on a ditch originally four feet in depth. As a matter of fact, there was some danger of shipwreck on Lake Oneida, where storms come up suddenly and ports were few; but the whole ballad is simply an elaboration of the canal's favorite joke, its tall tale. I give the version printed in *The American Vocalist* (1853).

Come, list to me, ye nobles, ye heroes and ye braves,  
For I've been at the mercy of the winds and the waves,  
I'll tell you of the hardships to me that did befall  
While going on a voyage up the Erie can-all [canawl].

From out of this famed harbor we sailed without fear,  
Our helm we put hard up, and for Albany did steer,  
We spoke full fifty craft, without any accident at all  
Until we passed into that 'are raging can-all.

We left old Albany harbor, just at the close of day,  
If rightly I remember 'twas the second day of May;  
We trusted to our driver, although he was but small,  
Yet he knew all the windings of that raging can-all.

It seemed as if the devil had work in hands that night,  
For our oil was all out, and our lamps they gave no light;



The clouds began to gather, and the rain began to fall,  
And I wished myself off and safe from the raging can-all.

With hearts chock-full of love, we thought of our sweethearts dear,  
And straight for Utica our gallant bark did steer,  
When in sight of that 'ere town, there came on a *white squall*,  
Which carried away our mizen mast, on the raging can-all.

The winds came roaring on, just like a wild cat scream,  
Our little vessel pitched and tost, straining every beam,  
The cook she dropt the bucket, and let the ladle fall,  
And the waves ran mountains high, on the raging can-all.

Our boat did mind the helm, just like a thing of life,  
Our mate he offered prayers for the safety of his wife;  
We threw our provisions overboard, Butter, Cheese, and all,  
And was put on short allowance, on the raging can-all.

Now the weather being foggy we couldn't see the track,  
We made our driver come on board, and hitched a lantern on his back.  
We told him to be fearless, and when it blew a gale,  
To jump *up* and knock *down* a horse, that's taking in a sail.

The captain bid the driver to hurry with all speed,  
His orders were obeyed, for he soon cracked up his lead;  
With that 'ere kind of towing, he allowed by twelve o'clock  
We should have the old critter right bang agin the dock.

But sad was the fate of our poor devoted bark,  
For the rain kept growing faster, and the night it grew dark,  
The horses gave a stumble, and the driver gave a squall,  
And they tumbled head and heels into the raging can-all.

The captain cried out, with a voice so clear and sound,  
"Cut them horses loose, my boys, or else we will be drowned!"  
The driver paddled to the shore, although he was but small,  
While the horses sank to rise no more in the raging can-all.

The cook she wrung her hands, and then she came on deck,  
Saying, "Alas! what will become of us, our vessel is a wreck."

The steersman knocked her over, for he was a man of sense,  
And the helmsman jumped ashore, and lashed her to a fence.

We had a load of Dutch, and stowed 'em in the hole,  
And the varmint wer'nt the least concerned for the welfare of their souls:  
The captain he went down to them, implored them for to pray,  
But all the answer that he got was "Due deutsch sproken, nex come  
arouse, ex for shtae".

The captain trembled for his money, likewise for his wife,  
But to muster courage up, he whittled with a knife,  
He said to us with a faltering voice, while tears began to fall,  
"Prepare to meet your death this night, on the raging can-all."

The passengers to save their souls would part with any money,  
The bar-keeper went on his knees, then took some peach and honey;  
A lady took some brandy, she'd have it neat or not at all,  
Kase there was lots of water in the raging can-all.

The captain came on deck, with spy glass in his hand,  
But the fog it was 'tarnel thick, he couldn't spy the land;  
He put his trumpet to his mouth, as loud as he could bawl  
He hailed for assistance from the raging can-all.

The sky was rent asunder, the lightening it did flash,  
The thunder rattled above, just like eternal smash;  
The clouds were all upsot, and the rigging it did fall,  
And we scudded under bare poles on that raging can-all.

A mighty sea rolled on astern, and then it swept our deck,  
And soon our gallant little craft was but a floating wreck;  
All hands sprang forward, aft the main-sheet for to haul,  
When slap dash! went our chicken coop into the raging can-all.

We took the old cook's petticoat, for want of a better dress,  
And rigged it out upon a pole, a signal of distress;  
We pledged ourselves hand to hand, aboard the boat to bide,  
And not to quit the deck while a plank hung to her side.



At length that horrid night cut dirt from the sky,  
The storm it did abate, and a boat came passing by,  
She soon espied our signal, while each on his knees did fall,  
Thankful we escaped a grave on the raging can-all.

We each of us took a nip, and signed the pledge anew,  
And wonderful, as danger ceased, how up our courage grew;  
The craft in sight bore down on us, and quickly was 'long side,  
And we all jumped aboard, and for Buffalo did ride.

And if I live a thousand years, the horrors of that night  
Will ever in my memory be, a spot most burning bright;  
There's not in this varsal world can ever raise my gall  
As the thoughts of my voyage on that raging can-all.

And now, my boys, I'll tell you how to manage wind and weather:  
In a storm hug the towpath, and lay feather to feather,  
And when the weather gets bad, and rain begins to fall,  
Jump right ashore, and streak it from the raging can-all.

The yarn is rather long, my boys, so I will let it drop,  
You can get the whole particulars in comic Elton's shop,  
At eighteen in Division Street you've only got to call,  
And you'll get an extra dose of the raging can-all.

It may be supposed that no further particulars would be required, even when the ballad was sung to the enchanting tune of *Caroline of Edinburgh Town*. I shall therefore proceed to a better ballad about one real danger present on the canal—the menace of the low bridge. *Boatin' on a Bull-Head* was found by Mr. Alex. Stearns of Syracuse, written out in an old copy-book left in his father's hair-trunk, long ago used on the canal; a copy was given to Mr. Walsh, who kindly furnished me with the following note:

A Bull-Head boat was built flush up to the cabin. The mule-cabin was away up in the bow, and the stern-cabin left no room for a stern-deck. The steersman had to stand on the cabin-roof to steer. Between the top of the cabin and the bridges there was very little clearance; therefore, if the steersman didn't see a bridge in time, in a very little space he was

swept off by the bridge-timbers. Many a canaller was killed or crippled by this type of boat.

I was sleepin' in a Line-barn  
And eatin' beans and hay,  
While the boss was kickin' my starn  
Ev'ry night and ev'ry day.

So I hired out canawlin'  
As a horny hand of toil,  
Drivin' mules that kept a-bawlin'  
'Long the towpath's smelly soil.

But my feet raised corns and blisters  
While the mules but raised a stink,  
Roped my feet and threw some twisters  
Plump into the dirty drink.

So I thought I'd give up drivin',  
For the captain thought so too,  
He said, "Hire out at divin'  
Or go bowin' a canoe."

I was dryin' on the heel-path,  
Watchin' boats haul up and down,  
A-shiverin' from the first bath  
I'd got since I left town,

When a boat tied in the basin  
At the wood-dock for the night,  
And I lost no time to hasten  
'Round the bridge to ask a bite.

They filled me up with beans and shote  
And lighted me a cob.  
They asked me if I could steer a boat  
And offered me a job.

The next mornin' I was boosted  
To the stern-cabin's roof;

With the tiller there I roosted  
And watched the driver hoof.

Now the boat she was a Bull-Head,  
Decked up to the cabin's top;  
Many canawlers now are dead  
Who had no place to drop.

(When the bowsman he forgot to yell,  
"Low bridge, ducker down!"  
The Bull-Head steersman went to hell  
With a bridge-string for a crown.)

We were loaded with Star Brand Salt;  
The Cap, he was loaded too.  
I wouldn't say it was his fault,  
But what was a man to do?

The bridge was only a heave away  
When I saw it 'round the bend.  
To the Cap a word I didn't say  
While turning end over end.

So canawlers, take my warning:  
Never steer a Bull-Head boat  
Or they'll find you some fair mornin'  
In the E-ri-e afloat.

Do all your fine navigatin'  
In the Line-barn full of hay,  
And *Low Bridge* you won't be hatin'  
And you'll live to Judgement Day.

Other varieties of tribulation are told in *Black Rock Pork*. Mr. Walsh says that this pork, alias Black Rock turkey, was sold about 1840 by Elijah Leonard in his grocery at Black Rock, now a part of Buffalo.

I shipped aboard of a lumber-boat,  
Her name was *Charles O'Rourke*.

The very first thing they rolled aboard  
Was a barrel of Black Rock pork.

They fried a chunk for breakfast  
And a chunk for luncheon too.  
It didn't taste so goody-good,  
And it was hard to chew.

From Buffalo to old New York  
They fed it to dear-old-me;  
They boiled the barrel and the rest of the pork,  
And we had it all for tea.

About three days out, we struck a rock  
Of Lackawanna coal.  
It gave the boat quite a shock,  
And stove in quite a hole.

So I hollered at the driver  
Who was off a-treadin' dirt;  
He jumped aboard and stopped the leak  
With his crumby [lousy] undershirt.

Now the cook upon this canal-boat  
Stood six feet in her socks;  
She had a bosom like a box-car,  
And her breath would open the locks.

Now the cook is in the poor-house,  
And the crew is all in jail,  
And I'm the only canaller  
That is left to tell the tale.

There are numerous variants of this very popular song. I like one which Johnny Bartley used to sing at the "Alhambra Varieties" on Commercial Street, Buffalo, in the eighteen-eighties:

I've travelled all around this world and Tonawanda too,  
I've been cast on desert island and beaten black and blue,  
I fought and bled at Bull's Run, and wandered as a boy,  
But I'll never forget the trip I took from Buffalo to Troy.

Whoa! Back! Get up!—Forget it I never shall,  
When I drove a team of spavin mules on the E-ri-e Canal.

The cook we had on board the deck stood six feet in her socks;  
Her hand was like an elephant's ear, and her breath would open the locks.  
A maid of fifty summers was she, the most of her body was on the floor,  
And when at night she went to bed, Oh sufferin'! how she'd snore!

Whoa! Back! Get up! and tighten up your lines,  
And watch the playful flies as on the mules they climb.  
Whoa! Back! Duck your nut!—Forget it I never shall,  
When I drove a team of spavin mules on the E-ri-e Canal.

"Kip" Conway gave Mr. Walsh a version in which he himself  
appears honorably for the refrain:

Hit 'er, shove 'er, go up in the juber-ju;  
Give her a line and let her go, ol' Kip'll pull her through.

Later in the song, after the coal has done its damage and the cook  
has been described, we get this satisfactory close:

One night on the Erie I couldn't sleep a wink,  
The crew they all bore down on me because I refused to drink.  
Fearful storms and heavy fogs, forget it I never shall,  
For I'm every inch a sailor-boy upon the Erie Canal.

When we arrived at Buffalo with Sally, Jack, and Hank,  
We greased ourselves in tallow-fat and slid off on a plank;  
Sally's in the poor-house, the rest of the crew's in jail,  
And I'm the only bugger afloat that's left to tell the tale.

Some of the cooks were inartistic in their mystery. Captain Wimett  
of Port Byron remembered a dismal rune beginning:

Hash is fried, hash is tried, hash is come in with the tide.  
[Good for] drunks, cut in chunks, made of hinges of old trunks.

Certainly the cooks added to the romance as well as to the comfort  
of the old Ditch. There were agencies where they could be hired,  
at Rome, Baldwinsville, Utica, Lockport, and elsewhere. Often the  
captain took his wife as cook. In at least one of the songs she is  
being wooed.



So pull in your towline,  
And haul in the slack,  
Take a reef in your britches,  
And straighten your back.

*But*, whatever you do,  
Don't never forget  
For to touch the mules gently  
When the cook's on the deck.

The cook, she's a daisy,  
She's dead-gone on me;  
She's got fiery red hair,  
And she's sweet twenty-three.

A less romantic version runs as follows:

You yacht on the Hudson, you ride on the Lake,  
But a trip on the Erie you bet takes the cake,  
Where the beefsteak is tough as a fighting dog's neck,  
And the cook she plays tag with the flies on the deck.

Our cook is a daisy and dead stuck on me,  
Has fiery red hair and she's sweet sixty-three.  
Though sunburned and freckled, a daisy, you bet,  
And we use her at night for a headlight on deck.

So haul in your towline and take in your slack,  
Take a reef in your breeches and straighten your back.  
Through sunshine and storm down the towpath we'll walk,  
And we'll touch up the mules when they kick and they balk.

Whatever his feelings about the cook, the boatman was likely to be fond of his horses or mules. Captain Wimett has a sort of *Canal-man's Farewell*:

Lay me on the hoss-bridge  
With my feet toward the bow;  
Let it be a Laker  
Or a Tonawanda scow.





our cook, though sunburned and freckled, a daisy, you bet

See that my mules are well cared for  
With salve upon their breasts.  
Give me a chunk of Black Rock pork  
And lay me down to rest.

Perhaps it should be explained that the Laker is a pointed boat, and a Tonawanda scow is rounded. The hoss-bridge was run from the boat to the bank when the animals were being changed.

A less elegiac version, whose vocabulary is charming, I had from Mr. Walsh; he put it together from versions given by Captain Jake Oatman and Captain Wesley Thomas:

Lay me on the horse-bridge  
With my feet toward the bow;  
And let it be a Lockport Laker  
Or a Tonawanda scow.

For the Erie, it is ragin',  
And our gin is gettin' low;  
Oh, I hardly think we'll get a drink  
Till we get to Buffalo.

For Nell has got blind staggers,  
And Maude has got the heaves;  
Black Tom has thrown his off-shoe,  
Our driver's got the weaves.

And as we got into Buffalo  
It was but four o'clock.  
The very first man we chanced to meet  
Was Gilson on the dock.

Says he, "What's all the noise?"  
Says he, "What team is that?"—  
"It's Yorker Min, and Goose-Neck Tim,  
And we're both a-gettin' fat."

At least one canal-horse has an epitaph. Miss Myrtle Ray of Port Byron says that her grandmother composed the following lines for a favorite who had given many years of faithful service towing barges:

Here lies the bones of my old hoss.  
He's none the better and none the wuss.  
From Senecy Falls to here he towed,  
And now he lies beside the road.

There is one spirited piece about a team of horses. The speaker is supposed to be a Dan Smith, canal grocer at Smith's Basin, who may have been at some time captain of a packet.

Attend all ye drivers, I sing of my team;  
They're the fleetest and strongest that ever was seen.  
There is none will toll with such speed down the crick  
Or start at the word of the driver so quick.

There's Dandy, my leader, looks boldly ahead  
With his tail raised aloft, and majestic his tread.  
He has a bright, shining coat of a beautiful bay;  
His eyes sparkle bright as the sun at noon-day.

He's a roarer, no doubt, there's few can match him;  
Once let him loose, and the devil may catch him.

The next in procession is my Charlie, a buster.  
Gen. Pluck might feel proud on his back at a muster.  
So graceful he moves in the midst of his team,  
So strong, you would think he traveled by steam!

And lastly my Jimmie, my saddle-horse true,  
It's hard to tell how much this horse cannot do.  
He has the pride of an emperor, the wisdom of kings;  
He moves o'er the ground like a bird on its wings.

At the call he is ready like a reindeer to jump;  
Obedient, when ordered he stands like a stump.

The three altogether in motion outdo  
Any team of their age, the whole canal through.  
Should any company try to go by us,  
We'll show them our steam whenever they try us.



While Baker and Walbridge their packets run daily,  
Proud Dandy and Jimmie and Charlie so gaily  
Will waft all the passengers through the canal  
In spite of all others, and in style, so they shall.

The classic tribute to the canal mule is *Low Bridge, Everybody Down*, alias *I've got a mule, her name is Sal*, which Carl Sandburg calls the *Volga Boat Song* of America. You may have heard the rich voice of the poet chanting it to the strumming of his guitar, "movingly, meditatively, so that the Erie Canal took on the character of a symbol of life as a highway to be taken ploddingly with steady pulse". The history of the song adds to my own enjoyment, for this is the canaller's farewell to his companion: when Mr. Thomas S. Allen published it in 1913, we were already in sight of the day when the Barge was to replace the Erie—the Barge which has no towpath for Sal. The stanzas have a minor tune that resembles a folk-melody; the refrain shifts to major with rhythmic suggestion of the age of "coon-song". I have never heard a canal-man sing the song, but my students rank it in favor with another collected by Sandburg entitled *The E-rie*. Here is part of Mr. Allen's ballad as originally published:

I've got an old mule and her name is Sal,  
Fifteen years on the Erie Canal,  
She's a good old worker and a good old pal,  
Fifteen years on the Erie Canal.  
We've hauled some barges in our day,  
Filled with lumber, coal and hay—  
And every inch of the way I know  
From Albany to Buffalo.

Low bridge, everybody down,  
Low bridge! We're coming to a town!  
You can always tell your neighbor, you can always tell your pal,  
If you've ever navigated on the Erie Canal.

Oh! where would I be if I lost my pal?  
Fifteen years on the Erie Canal,  
Oh, I'd like to see a mule as good as Sal,

Fifteen years on the Erie Canal.  
A friend of mine once got her sore,  
Now he's got a broken jaw,  
'Cause she let fly with her iron toe  
And kicked him in to Buffalo.

When Walter Edmonds used this song in *Rome Haul* (1929), he borrowed from Sandburg a stanza in which Sal is the name of a cook, and it is as a cook that Sal appears in Carl Carmer's *Hurricane's Children* (1937). Carmer has taken John Darling from his farm and rafts in Sullivan County, has put him on the Erie, and has had him fall in love with the heroine whose hands were as big as elephant's ears—a daring example of what the folklorists might call "accretion". Here is the stanza used in *Rome Haul*:

Drop a tear for big-foot Sal,  
The best damn cook on the Erie Canal;  
She aimed for Heaven but she went to Hell—  
Fifteen years on the Erie Canal.  
The missioner said she died in sin;  
Hennery said it was too much gin;  
There weren't no bar where she hadn't been,  
From Albany to Buffalo.

The other song which Edmonds borrowed from Sandburg's *American Songbag* for *Rome Haul* is the one which I mentioned as a favorite with students. Part of the success of the *E-ri-e* is due to the limited range of its tune.

We were forty miles from Albany,  
Forget it I never shall,  
What a terrible storm we had one night  
On the E-ri-e Canal.

Oh the E-ri-e was a-rising,  
The gin was getting low;  
And I scarcely think we'll get a drink  
Till we get to Buffalo.

We were loaded down with barley,  
We were chuck up full of rye;



And the captain he looked down at me  
With his goddam wicked eye.

Oh the girls are in the *Police Gazette*,  
The crew are all in jail;  
I'm the only living sea-cook's son  
That's left to tell the tale.

You now have some idea of the lore of the canal in its three eras—the Ditch, the Erie, and the Barge—its songs, fighting men, boy drivers, cooks, horses, and mules; but I have told you nothing about the passengers who, in the days before the Civil War, sweated in the packets that sometimes exceeded the legal speed-limit of four miles an hour while the sleek horses kicked dirt into Clinton's Ditch. That is a whole subject in itself; Mr. A. F. Harlow has presented it vividly in his *Old Towpaths* (1926), particularly in a chapter (XXXII) called *Travelling by Canal*. He says that by 1829 there was such competition that various lines had "runners" at Schenectady who contended so vigorously for business that one strip of canalbank was long known as the Battleground.

You are to imagine a boat seventy-five or eighty feet long by eleven feet in width, and with a height from keel to roof that seldom exceeded eight feet. Charles Dickens found that it was hard for a man of middle stature to walk to and fro in the cabin "without making bald places on his head by scraping it on the roof". In the bow would be a little cuddy for the crew; then the ladies' dressing room or sleeping cabin, sometimes separated from the men's cabin only by a red curtain. The main cabin, used for dining room and for the men's dormitory, was thirty-six to forty-five feet long, with a bar in the rear. Finally, in the extreme rear was the kitchen, presided over by a Negro man who also acted as a bartender and must have spent fifteen to eighteen hours a day at work. The crew was the standard one of a captain, two drivers, and two steersmen. On the Erie packets the horses were usually kept in barns along the route, not on the boat.

All went fairly well in the daytime, but night brought trials far in excess of anything found on the modern American railroad. The berths were narrow frames topped by a strip of canvas; at the rear

they were attached to holes in the wall by two iron rods; at the front they were suspended from the ceiling. You found at least three beds in a tier, sometimes four, instead of the lower and upper of the modern Pullman. Imagine forty people—and there might be twice that number—crowded onto these shelves. Again Dickens has the right word: "Three long tiers of hanging book shelves designed apparently for volumes of the small octavo size." Sometimes additional accommodations—so to speak—were provided in the middle of the cabin. When Bernhard, Duke of Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach, visited the State in 1825-6, he was quartered in the exact center of the men's cabin on a bench supplemented by a chair. The acidulous Miss Harriet Martineau, a Unitarian, in addition to "the heat and noise, the known vicinity of a compressed crowd packed like herrings in a barrel", suffered also "under an additional annoyance in the presence of sixteen Presbyterian clergymen—some of the most unprepossessing of their class". A passenger assured the English lady that these gentlemen were so strict that they wouldn't drink water out of the Brandywine River. What irritated her most was that instead of trudging along the towpath from time to time, to air out the cabin, these godly men shut up the cabin for prayers before dinner, for missionary conversation in the afternoon, and for Scripture reading and prayers late into the night. Good Deacon Eaton, who loved the boy drivers, could not have complained about these devout persons, as he did about other clergymen, that they refrained from "testifying" on the packets. It is hard to please everybody; it was very hard to please Miss Martineau.

A German tourist, Frederick Gerstaecker, managed to find humor; it was in the 1830's, when packets were flourishing.

I awoke with a dreadful feeling of suffocation; cold perspiration stood on my forehead and I could hardly draw my breath; there was a weight like lead on my stomach and chest. I attempted to cry out—in vain; I lay almost without consciousness. The weight remained immovable; above me was a noise like distant thunder; it was my companion of the upper story, who lay snoring over my head; and that the weight which pressed on my chest was caused by his body no longer remained a doubtful point. I endeavored to move the Colossus—impossible. I tried to push, to cry out—in vain. He lay like a rock on my chest and seemed

to have no more feeling. I bethought me of my breastpin, which luckily I had not taken out of my cravat the night before; with great difficulty I succeeded in reaching the pin, which I pressed with a firm hand into the mass above me. There was a sudden movement, which procured me momentarily relief; but the movement soon subsided, the weight was growing more insupportable, and to prevent being utterly crushed, I was obliged to reapply the pin. "What's that? Murder! Help!" cried a deep bass voice above me. Feeling myself free, I slipped like an eel from under the weight and saw by the dim light of the lamp a sight of no common occurrence. A stout, heavy man who slept in the upper frame without mattress was too much for the well-worn canvas; during his sleep it had given way under the weightiest part of his form, which descended till it found support on my chest. The thrust of my breastpin caused his body to jerk upward, allowing me to escape. As he returned to his former position with greater force, the support being gone, the canvas split still wider, and more than half asleep, he was sitting on my bed, while his head and feet remained in his own. He continued calling out, "Help! Murder!" Everybody started up to see what was the matter and to laugh heartily at the extraordinary attitude of this stout gentleman.

If a visitor from afar could find such humor in distress, it is no wonder that the old Ditch continues to wind its sluggish way through the hearts of Yorkers. Almost the first words that I can recall were shouted by my jovial father—a man as tall as Paddy Ryan—when he passed through a doorway with me on his shoulder: "Low bridge!" I was remembering that call the other day at the bachelor home of Mr. John Helt who lives near Verona now after spending forty-seven years on the canal. He said:

We didn't need any of these horns you've read about. When we got near a lock, we'd just holler, "Hurrah, lock!" Lots of good hollering on the canal. Captain Guest had a boat that he named the Uno. If someone called out in the dark to ask her name, he'd holler, "Uno!" It sounded kind of impolite . . . Yes, sir, I had a good time on the Erie from the day when I started out to drive—a boy of thirteen—for eight dollars a month and board. When you got to be a steersman, you might get as much as thirty-five; and if you saved your money, some day you'd own a boat worth three thousand dollars. You moved fast enough: in six hours on duty, driving or steering, you'd go nine or ten miles with a loaded boat, and with a light one you could hit 'er up to fifteen or

eighteen. We had a pretty good time. By May first we were always ready to go back onto the canal.

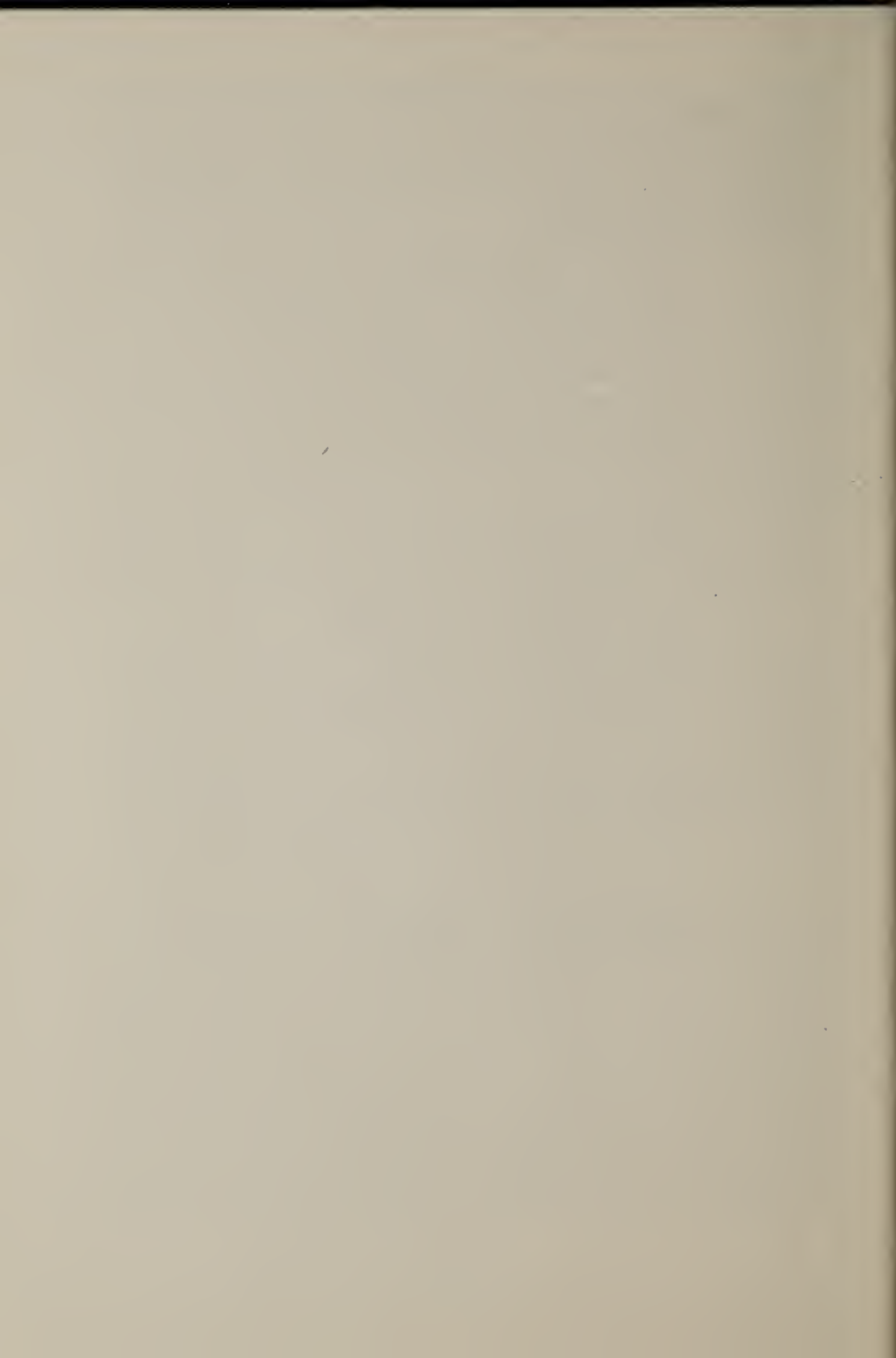
Someone like Mr. Helt must have made up the parody called *A Life on the Raging Canawl*:

A life on the raging canawl,  
A home on its muddy deep,  
Where through summer, spring, and fall,  
The frogs their vigils keep.  
Like a fish on the hook I pine,  
On this dull, unchanging shore—  
Oh give me the packet line,  
And the muddy canawl's dull roar.

Once more on the deck I stand  
Of my own swift gliding craft—  
The horses trot off on the land,  
And the boat follows close abaft.  
We shoot through the turbid foam  
Like a bull frog in a squall—  
And, like the frogs, our home  
We'll find in the muddy canawl.

The sun is no longer in view,  
The clouds have begun to frown,  
But, with a bumper or two,  
We'll say, let the storm come down.  
And the song we'll sing, one and all,  
While the storm around us pelts,  
A life on the muddy canawl,  
Oh, we don't want nothin' else.















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